

Cobra Notes

from David Slusser

Introduction

Bearing some relationship to a "capture-the-flag" kid's game, John Zorn boiled down a lot of improvisational strategies and organized them in arrays of systems that could easily be cued with simple gestures. There is not a conductor, *per se*, but a prompter, who recognizes calls made by members of the ensemble. The prompter then holds up the corresponding, color-coded cue card for that operation, so all the ensemble can see and prepare, then gives the downbeat for it to occur. The score lists the action for that card, and the hand signal the ensemble member must give to request it. It's up to the members of the ensemble to shape and guide the piece, and the competing strategies give each reading a unique form.

The play starts with the prompter waiting for ensemble members to raise their hands with a suggested cue. The prompter chooses someone; the player communicates by pointing to a body part from the score to indicate a certain improvisational system, with a number of fingers raised to define the action to be taken within the system. In some cases, the player also communicates specific players for that cue. When everybody's on board, the prompter lowers the card in a clear downbeat to start the music. It's immediately permitted, but not always good taste, for any player to now make another call. When to recognize the next call is the discretion of the prompter. The addition of Guerrilla Systems allows a player to become a renegade and play as he/she chooses, or to take on compadres and subvert the entire proceedings. Guerrilla Systems are halted by stealth from the rest of the ensemble in a throat slitting gesture to the prompter that must go undetected by the Guerillas. The game then takes up where it left off. The play ends with the cueing of one of three end cues, which the prompter will give three chances to be countermanded. A typical "Cobra" lasts anywhere from one to fifteen minutes, with several "Cobras" making up a performance.

At this point, a reading of the following annotated score should get you going. In addition, [here](#) is a colored clean up of Zorn's original 1 page score, which doesn't explain anything, but is a good cheat-sheet for performers.

Links

- [Wikipedia](#) has a short overview with some good information.
- [An interview](#) with Zorn in which he gives an overview of how it all works.
- At the same site, there is [a bunch of reviews](#) of recordings of several game pieces, including Cobra.
- [The Art of Cobra](#) describes the "Portland Rules", a simplified version of Cobra, in a fair bit of detail.
- [Room 101 Games](#) is a Toronto gaming (not music!) group that teaches Cobra to general audiences.
- [Here](#) is a bunch of reviews of recordings of several game pieces, including Cobra.

Cobra

1. **P** POOL

players not playing may come in; players already playing stop or radically change the quality of what they are playing

	2.  RUNNER	caller selects players to come in at downbeat, others stop
MOUTH	3.  SUBSTITUTE	those playing <u>must</u> stop; those not playing <u>must</u> come in
	4.  SUB CROSSFADE	those playing fade out while those not playing fade in
	1.  DUOS	choose someone to play with, any length, any number of times
NOSE	2.  TRADES	chains of traded solos by pointing, anyone can start another up
	3.  EVENTS 1, 2 or 3	one, two or three singular sonic occurrences at will
	4.  BUDDIES	like duos, but once
EYE	1.  CARTOON TRADES	loud, outlandish gesture, pass to anyone
	2.  ORDERED CARTOON TRADES with guests	to left or right player can draft one or more to join their turn
EAR	1.  G = G	same <u>group</u> of players radically change the music at downbeat
	2.  M = M	players pick substitutes who try to play the same <u>music</u>
	3.  VOLUME Δ	crescendo, decrescendo or abrupt change as prompted
HEAD	1.  SOUND MEMORY 1	write down what you're playing; reproduce when called
	2.  SOUND MEMORY 2	a second set
	3.  SOUND MEMORY 3	a third; any memory number can be recalled
PALM	1.  CUT	silence, as abrupt ending to the piece
	2.  CODA	5 to 10 second resolution, natural ending; stop on final downbeat
	3.  HOLD & FADE	at downbeat, sustain your note and decay

Palm cues can be flagged off up to 3 times by making another non-ending call.

GUERRILLA SYSTEMS

Lone Renegade just dons a headband and does as they please ... or

SQUAD LEADER + 2 — guerrilla raises fist and chooses 2 cohorts whose primary duty is to watch out for a spy, who can end their reign with an undetected throat slitting gesture to the prompter, who'll hold

up a ? sign to ask the guerillas who did it. They can all impose the following tactics on the rest of the group:

TACTICS

- ⌚ 1. Imitate indefinite (crooked finger "come here" & indicate who)
- ↔ 2. Trade indefinite (point back & forth to indicate participants)
- 3. Hold either (flat palm drawn horizontally; long tone)
- ⌚ 4. Capture to downbeat (thumbs up directed at a player cuts them)
- ⟳ 5. Switch/crossfade to downbeat (circles with pointing finger) replace given players

OPERATIONS (Squad Leader only makes calls)

- FIST **I** DIVISI squad leader tactics (as above & can call solos over bg)
- II** INTERCUT Locus Unit (cut to the Guerrilla trio, who use hand cues) then return to the previous sound and players
- III** FENCING Unit (can substitute an alternate player) genre playing. Starts as solo in recognizable style, next player joins in contrasting genre. No silence.

GUERRILLA UNIT LIFE SPAN: 7 Downbeats

- ⌚ SPY may cut unit during OPERATIONS ONLY if unidentified.
Unit members may cut at any time
- ⌚ end of Divisi superimposition — back to regular system

Some Locus Hand Cues

- ⌚ thumb = stop
- ⌚ hand = rhythm
- ⌚ finger = pip
- hand = drone
- ↔ back & forth = trade
- ⌚ one = intercut
- ⌚ cut = change

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